FROM THE ROOF TOP (An Afghan War Story) By W. Douglas Newton

SOMETHING within the drink-sodden man fluttered and woke at the first brisk chirrup of the firing.

He had been prone and inert, a leg upon the soft cushions and tapestries, under the silken green awning that threw a purple oasis of shade in the universal glare of bitter Afghanistan sunlight that pervaded the ochre-colored roof tops. Somewhere in the remote distance, and muffled and swaddled by the deodars, a single rifle had gone off "pip-pop." He had shifted in his coma at that sound.

Another rifle had shattered the clarified silence of these austere hills. Before its echoes had stopped, a full-throated smash of firing had answered it. Into the clear air there began to rise the long, drawled throb of hand-beaten drums.

The man thrust his elbow deep into the effeminate cushions and hoisted his body aloft. He was a powerful man with a torso that was big and strong, in spite of the overlaying obesity and flabbiness bulging his exotic and Oriental trapping of silk. The face under the mat of fair hair was large and it might have been strong also, if the man had so willed. The jaw was firm and well modelled. The mouth, loose and weak, overweighted that firmness. The nose and features had power. The bagginess and dissoluteness of the heavy, bile-filled eyes, counteracted that power. The skin had a moist and unwholesome sleekness that not even the man's brownness cancelled. The face was the face of a man who had surrendered all his gifts and powers to gratify his appetites. That body bore out the truth conveyed by the face. It was a fine body, a soldierly body become gross.

As the man rested on his elbow the thrall of indulgence was still upon him. It held his soft body captive. It held his wits amused, fuddled. But somewhere in that chaos of bemused instinct a spark of soul had been kindled by the sound of firing. The man hung there besotted, feebly and ceaselessly licking with a dry tongue dryer lips, but in his dull eyes there was a faint glimmer of alertness.

The drumming throbbed up and up to him from out the huge and swinging valley below the house. It was muffled and muted by the firs and deodars that stood beneath the house, between it and the valley. Weaving in and out of the drum-beats was the thin, keen pipe of men shouting.

Presently firing began to pass backward and forward from the distance to the remote distance. It was a crackling and sharp-splitting reverberating, as though a musket had been fired between rocky cliffs. Now it was as single emphatic hammer strokes.

It went on loosely, incoherently for a minute or two. Abruptly it focussed in a tearing burst. The drums throbbed up to clamor. The shouting swelled up in menace.

Then, like the voice of order, a new sound slashed out. It was a sudden bursting detonation of many rifles speaking at once, and speaking together. It smashed off, one—two—three. It was like the steady beat of a metronome.

The listening debauche stopped licking his lips. His face became strained and fixed. He listened tensely.

"Volley firing," he whispered. "Volley firing!"

In spite of his gorgeous, Oriental clothes, the whole exotic suggestion of his Afghan surroundings, the man was an Englishman, and he had spoken in English.

He hung listening for a space, the bemused look slowly thinning before his new intentness. He made no movement. The beat-beat-beat of the drums increased. It worked up crescendo, like a theme of some diabolical music. The shouting became plainer, harder, more evil. The clock-like smashes of the volleys stopped every now and then; always when they restarted, they were nearer. But they were always clock-like. They never grew ragged. They never grew flustered.

The man listened to them as though they conveyed to him a peculiar meaning. Once he nodded his head.

"The fellow who's handling those men knows his trade," he whispered to himself. He nodded as though clinching an argument. He could give that judgment with certainty. At one time, before this, before he had sold his caste—his race, his honor for this softness, this self-gratification—he had known that trade. He had been a soldier.

When the firing had come very near indeed, another and newer sound joined its tumult. Abruptly there jumped out a short, sullen shock of explosion. Something like a man beating a carpet with a stick but louder—much. On top of it another. The man pressed both hands backward into the yielding cushions. He straightened his arms and sat upright.

"Guns!" he muttered. "Guns!"

He stayed there for a moment pulling his drink-bemused faculties together. "Guns," he told himself, "that means a bigger engagement—guns." He tried to recollect why guns should be at work here in Afghanistan. His brain was working in a disjointed manner. Certain things he remembered, the rest was a wooliness that he could not disentangle.

He recollected dreamily that once—he did not know how long ago—he had predicted trouble. Not for himself, because he no longer took an interest in these things—not worth it—but trouble for Afghanistan. He'd had an argument with Fruiz, the fat sheep owner, or it might have been one of the women, anyhow, he'd said there would be trouble. The Russians, he recalled that, had been trying to get in with the Amir, and Sher Ali was shifty. He had cold-shouldered the British, too. Then, oh, yes, he remembered that, they had killed some one, a police officer. Cavagnari, wasn't it? He had known Cavagnari a little in the old life, before he got into trouble down there in India. A very decent man, Cavagnari.

He remembered distinctly saying there'd be trouble then. It was a bad business. But, of course, it was nothing to do with him. He had given up all those things, stepped aside years ago. He had gone his own way. He had chucked the old life—turned Mohammedan—read the Koran, bowed to the East and all that—for what it mattered—and had lived a life he liked. Still, he had said that the Afghans must expect trouble.

As he sat there, other disconnected whiffs of memory drifted into his head. Wasn't it one of the women who had said the British were up at Kabul; had smashed Sher Ali, had fortified the place, and were now out and about fighting the tribes? He remembered there had been fighting. He had heard it in the distance; the long and secret mutterings of the guns. That was the explanat'on.

The women hadn't told him, naturally Naida wouldn't let 'em do that. Naida was afraid, afraid she'd lose him, the puss, afraid he'd get excited; and then the Afghans, always suspicious because they thought a white man couldn't change his spots—rot that—would kill him.

Still he had heard. He had heard them chattering. He'd been having the usual evening and was lying down, only he hadn't been as far gone as they supposed—and he'd heard. He hadn't heard much because he'd given up all those things, didn't excite himself about them any longer, so he hadn't paid attention. But he'd heard enough.

The valley was diapered in an exquisite manner by the irrigation terraces and the orchards and patches of cultivation that clothed these terraces. The irrigation nullas ran through these patches like the outline of some richly intricate and irresponsibly involved design. The floor of the valley was like an enamel jewel, little blobs and lozenges of vivid color being contained by the convoluted outline of the irrigation cuts. Toward the end of the valley the ground was clearer, naked.

From side to side of this cleared space moved a thick and solid line of advancing men. The ends of this extraordinary line were two miles apart. The moving mass must have contained at least 10,000 souls.

The big man drew himself a little nearer to the opening in the tent. His interest flickered up. He was like an Emperor of Rome suddenly confronted with a spectacle organized to surprise and to please him. His jaded and calloused senses quickened, even through the atrophy begot of indulgence.

As he looked, pickets, leading bunches of saddled horses, trotted into view on the left and right. They came from under the trees of an orchard, and went forward several hundred yards. They wheeled about and waited. At their heels there broke out of the trees four long teams, with four exquisite little guns rocking at the heels of the teams. The horses trotted forward daintily, prettily. The guns rolled forward in delicate, yet easy pomp. Every trace was taut, everything as exquisite as on the parade ground; the men were sitting their horses like statues.

The four beautiful teams swung into vision from under trees, swung out of vision under trees. The man on the roof let his breath whistle through his teeth in appreciation.

"Pretty," he muttered. "Pretty. The fellow in command certainly does know his job." He remembered the empty limbers. "Horse Artillery—wonder whose lot they are?"

Under the trees from whence the guns had come rose the crisp, mechanical smashes of the volleys. The smoke of the discharge boiled out from under the leaves and rose through the branches in hazy scarves and balloons of milk-colored mist. Presently through the trunks men appeared, walking slowly. They were working their way steadily backward in good order. They paused to fire calmly, deliberately, as they moved.

The most considerable body of men was that to the right. The watcher picked out the uniform and the color of the faces; they were Britishers and Lancers. Those on the left were natives, Bengalis—and Lancers, too. Like the British Lancers they were dismounted and using their carbines. What astounded the watcher was the smallness of the force. There were less than 300 men, and they were opposed to thousands, possibly tens of thousands.

The watcher on the roof began to grow feebly excited.

"They'll be wiped out," he muttered. "Wiped right out." He raised himself on his elbows to see the better. His old soldierly instincts reasserted themselves. "Some fool has made a mistake," he muttered. "A rotten bad mistake. They'll be wiped out."

He did not know, he could not know, but, as a matter of fact, no one had made a mistake. The force beneath him, General Massy's, had been moved out by General Roberts from Kabul, to help, with another and stronger force, break up a combination of various scattered bands of Afghans and ghazis. These bands threatened to gather together, and, under the latest of the Amirs pretending to the throne of Afghanistan, Mahomed Jan, menace Kabul. General Massy should have, by this time, formed a conjunction with the stronger column, General Macpherson's. Owing to several things a delay in Macpherson's start and the rapidity of the Afghan advance, the conjunction had not been made, and Massy had to face the great army alone with his hopelessly inadequate force.

The situation of the little force was desperate, yet even the watcher on the roof did not know that so desperate was it that the keenest and quickest brain in the Indian army, General Roberts, had himself galloped out from Kabul to endeavor, by all the resources of his genius, to save the day.

General Roberts had perceived at one glance, trivial though the skirmish seemed, it held in its balance the safety of the whole of the British force in Afghanistan. Let the Afghans break through to the heights above Kabul, and Kabul might be rushed before the garrisons could prepare. Let Kabul be rushed, and the British rule in Afghanistan would be swept away utterly.

The guns and the covering cavalry had come out in the open plain now. The guns had swung about and were thumping off steadily. The men moved about their pieces with mechanical zest, collected, fell back and fired with unflurried regularity; collected, fell back and fired again.

"Oh, good men," whispered the man on the roof. "Good! Good!"

He was panting a little with excitement. His labored breath came wheezily through his rusty throat. His pulse had quickened. He wasn't an Englishman, of course, now. And all these things didn't interest him much. He'd washed his hands of them. Still—still it was good work, capable work, soldier work. All that had been good, soldierly in his past welled up within him, pushed back his drink stupor, warned his dull brain. He was not an Englishman now, still——

Presently he heard what they could not hear down there on the plain, a flurry of shooting over by the village of Deh-i-Mazang. He looked toward it. He saw a thin reck of smoke hanging over the gorge by the village, and nothing else. Then through a burst of open ground catapulted a tiny horseman, his horse's legs going like india rubber. The man on the roof nodded. He saw wisdom in this. Some one was going into Kabul to raise the alarm. That was good, especially as they hadn't hit him.

In a moment he frowned. He remembered that stream of running men who had left Bhagwana village for the gorge. The gorge was the only road to Kabul—the only way out of the valley. A single horseman might get through the ambushed Afghans, but would a force of guns and cavalry get through? He frowned. This looked like bad business. Even his dulled wits told him it was bad business. If the guns and cavalry fighting in the valley below tried to retire through the gorge before troops from Kabul had shifted the ambushed Afghans, then—then they would be wiped out; right out. It was a bad business. Some one ought to tell our chaps below about it.

The thought troubled him, irritated them as an insistent fly might irritate a sleeping fly. Someone should warn our chaps down below; prevent 'em from retiring through the gorge. Some one should do it. It was none of his business, besides, he couldn't interfere, it would mean unpleasantness for him. Yet someone should——

The thought tormented him. He tried languidly to brush it away as he would try to brush away a fly. He moved his mind from it and looked again at the battling of the little British force.

He was very much annoyed to see that that force was even now retiring. Two of the guns and their supports were falling back. Like a lyric moment of music, a gout of horsemen abruptly separated itself from the British troops and flung at the flushed and advancing Afghans. The horsemen swept forward in a curve like a sickle. There was a flashing and tumultuous impetuosity in their charge. The sun flamed on them and over them as they went, and their lance heads blazed. Up to him came the staccato drumming of the pounding hoof-beasts and the roaring of men. The lancers flashed straight at the Afghan host. They went into them with a shock. He heard the crash even up there. There was a whirl of dust, of horses, of men, of arms. There was a worrying of fighters engaged in life and death struggle, the flare and banging of jingals, the flame light of great knives catching the sun. Then like a perfect machine the cavalry wheeled and came out again swingingly.

Excitement had burst up in the sodden man. He had beat with his fists on his silken cushions.

"Fine," he had breathed. "Fine, fine, oh, fine;" Weak, sentimental tears ran out of his eyes down his soft cheek. "Well done! Britain. Well done! Lancers," he snivelled. It touched him poignantly. If he had stayed on down there in India, if they hadn't kicked him out because of certain things that had happened to him in the Indian quarter, he would have taken part in movements like that,. He would have led charges. A wave of maudelin sentimentalism engulfed him. He snivelled drunkard's tears.

Presently he muttered.

"No good, though. No good at all. Plucky, 'specially to go slap at 'em like that over that nulla'd ground. But no good at all." He nodded his head with sorrowful wisdom. "They've got to retire before a force like that. I thought they'd have to retire—and they'll be cut to pieces."

He frowned again as he thought of that ambush in the gorge. He tried to put the idea away. He could not put it away now. That charge had started something working inside him. It was no good telling himself that it didn't matter, that he had finished all that sort of thing—was out of it. He was remembering that he was—had been—and Englishman, and there were Englishmen below him. He was remembering he had been a cavalryman and there were cavarymen below him.

And these Englishmen, these cavalrymen, were going to be annihilated, if they retired through the gorge, and some one ought to tell them.

Below him they were actually retiring. The cavalry had fallen back, the guns had fallen back, although one gun remained grotesquely, a thing of wild angels, stuck helplessly in a water-cut. The whole force was retiring. The man on the roof grew irritated as a god might grow irritated at the thoughtless and stupid actions of helpless men.

"No, no," he muttered. "No, not retire. Best fall back on Bhagwana village, and hold on there. Hold on until supports come from Kabul. Best do that. Silly, silly fools, why don't you do that?" He was very angry, as only a half sober man can be very angry.

His reason asserted itself.

"Still, of course," he muttered, "they don't know. They don't know. Bhagwana's empty. Someone ought to tell 'em."

He grew more irritated, angry with the members of that midget, bulldog plucky British force. They had put him in a false position. When he said that someone ought to tell 'em, that stupid, tactless emotional centre, his conscience, had immediately retorted that he was the only one to tell them. He was the only one who knew.

That irritated him. It wasn't fair to him. It wasn't even logical. He wasn't English any longer. Englishmen, even didn't want him to be English any longer. After that affair of the women's cantonments they had kicked him out. He had washed his hands of them. He had done with the race. Still, there were men of a race that was—had been his race—down there, and they would be annihilated unless someone warned them. Someone friendly—and he was the one friendly soul in all that valley—the only one. He knew it and cursed himself for knowing it.

The force was retiring in the imperturbable manner of British forces. The crackling carbines beat a coldly contemptuous defiance into the over-excited, over-elated mass of Afghans and grazis. The volleys were level, like sober words of command. The British were retiring, but they were using their own method of retirement. They were going to be wiped out, but they were going to be wiped out with the dignity and circumstance of a great nation.

The man on the roof glowed at the splendid valor of it. His softness, his appetite for luxury, ease, inertia, soft and sensual living fought that kindling glow. He ought to warn that force, he alone could, and it would be easy—he had only to climb on to one of his fast horses below, and the thing was done.

But "it's too much," he muttered, "too much. It'll mean my death. The Afghans will kill me. It'll be the end of all this, all that I love—Naida—my happiness here—all."

He wept a little again. Too much was being put on him. It was not fair.

The cavalry and guns below him went back steadily. There was no doubt about it, to his mind. They were making for the gorge by the village of Deh-i-Mazang, and making for death.

The jewel-hilted dagger fell from a fold of his silken robe and clattered to the hard surface of the roof. The two women turned and stared at the man.

Last night's orgy had weakened him. He took a step forward, his knees slacked under him, and he nearly fell. He stood still, rocking gently, trying to command his flaccid muscles to order. He looked, blinking, at the two women. They stared with their bright, unwinking eyes at him. He thought, dully, how bright and sloe-like those big eyes were, how full of gem-like lustre; and, like a gem, how hard and cruel they might be.

He made another step forward and stood trembling. He was not yet master of his limbs. The younger, the more exquisite of the women, came forward to him with a flowing movement as exquisite as herself.

"Jan," she said (his name had been John), "Jan, what troubles thee?"

He blinked at her as he stood swaying. He told himself that he would have to be very crafty with Naida. If she guessed she would stop him, and the British would be massacred. He adopted the harsh tone of a Mohamedan addressing his womankind.

"Out of my way, woman," he said, thickly. "I go into the house."

The woman smiled at him, smiled with her lips, but not with her bright, keen eyes. She was a tall woman and a beautiful one. She had a lithe and Psyche-like grace. Her robes clung about her, exhibiting the splendor of her slim and flowing lines, the firmness, the flexible vigor of her pliant and budding sexhood. The flesh of her fragrant bare arms, of her warm, rich throat, of her delicate face, was of the texture of satin. It was soft, redolent, glowing with the warm blood of splendid health and splendid youth, beneath the glow of her warm russet skin. Her features were sensitive, quick and fragile. They were as enchanting as things of porcelain. They were full of the sleepy arrogance, the passionate yet reticent allure of the high-bred Jewish type. Her eyes beneath the long, curved lashes were deep wells of sloe-black mystery; her mouth was soft and very red.

An intoxicating and exquisite woman. The Englishman's will became fluid before this exotic beauty. He'd have to give up Naida if he went down to the British. He'd never see her again. It was asking too much—too much.

The volley firing that had been quiet for some moments smashed out again. He pulled himself together. No, there were moments when a man must not weaken before women—moments when he must rise above love. He took another step forward.

"I go below. Out of my way," his thick voice muttered.

The woman stepped up to him. Her arm went about his shoulder. The subtle perfume of her garments crept into his nostrils—stung him, weakened him.

"The sun is at thy head, my lord," she whispered in her ivory voice. "Have a care, light of my existence." To be in the sun is to be in danger."

The Englishman leaned against the woman. His senses sang at the allure and loveliness of her, as they had always sung. He paused, wrestling with his senses.

"To be in the sun is to be in danger," she had said, and he had understood. He had not lived amongst the metaphor-speaking, the symbol-loving Afghans all these years for nothing. Naida understood what was in his mind. She knew what it would mean to him—to them—for she would suffer if he suffered, as Afghans did not vent their hate by halves. She had warned him. She feared as he feared. Perhaps she was right.

An uproar of triumphant shouting from the Afghans swung up out of the valley. It pricked him like a spur. He pushed the woman.

"Out of my way!" he shouted, fiercely. "Out of my way!" He swung forward.

"Ayesha," shrilled Naida. The other woman, like a cat, slipped across the roof. She vanished down the roof trap. The door of the trap came down with a bang. The Englishman heard the bolts shoot home. His way was cut off.

It was a clever act on Naida's part, but in a way it was also a mistake. With the rattle of the bolts the last shred of hesitation went from the Englishman. In that desperate act he saw how desperate must be the situation of the British force, and he knew now that he must save it. The coiling fumes of luxury and softness and drunkenness slipped from his brain. His body was weak; his mind, however, was of astonishing clarity. He was going to save the British force and he would need all his wits to save it.

They stood facing each other still, the woman and he. The woman was looking at him; her lids had drooped over her eyes, but the glitter of the pupils underneath belied the seduction of the glance. He glanced about him, his movements dull, his mind keen. He had to warn the British. How was he to do it?

He turned about slowly and walked back to the shelter of the silken tent, his mind groping for ideas. Naida moved softly, silkenly, by his side. With shuffling gait he went to the tent. His foot kicked the jewelled dagger. Naida bent and lifted it from before his light-shod feet. She looked up, laughing, in that graceful and exquisite pose. But he did not look at her. He dropped to his knees on the cushions and his hands fumbled awkwardly amidst them. Naida knelt by his side, looking at him.

In a minute he put his left hand out and held open the silk of the tent where he had slit it. Below him the fight had quickened and he saw he had no time to lose. The Afghans swarmed and rushed at the little British band. They were menacing them with a flurry of dashes. The battle smoke and dust boiled and seethed about them until they looked like demons in the midst of hell. Now they were right up to the retiring force, and their great and evil knives flamed as they rose to slash. Now they held back, and a blank open space appeared between them and their victims. The British moved back steadily. The flare of their volleys blasted into all rushes with frigid and godlike zeal. They were unbowed and undismayed. A fine and plucky race—and death was waiting ready to pounce upon them at their backs.

All this the Englishman on the roof saw in a quick-flung glance. Then Naida put her hand out and pulled the silk together.

"Away, woman," snarled the Englishman, and he swore.

"Oh, my master and my lord," whispered Naida, "it is not good to look." She held the silk tight against his fluttering hands. With a surprising effort the Englishman put out all his strength and pulled. The whole wall of silk fell away and upon them, and the biting sunlight blazed in.

Naida uttered a low cry and began to free her head with her left hand from the clinging folds of the tent. The Englishman's head was clear, though the silk enwrapped his shoulders. He remained passive. He drew from under the cushions his right hand. A sword of light started into the air as his hand came free. In his fingers shown the burnished and glittering surface of Naida's metal mirror.

The woman was still struggling, but he did not heed her. He angled the mirror this way, that way, until it caught the full impact of the sun's light. He began to move it jerkily, but steadily. Flick-flick-flick went a column of vivid light through the gap in the trees, over the heads of the retiring British force.

The man on the roof top had remembered he had been a soldier.

Steadily, as if in a dream, he flicked the beam down over the British force. He did this several times to attract attention. Then he held it rigid, the sun beating straight out from it, in the regulation call.

Naida had freed herself from the tent. She bent her soft, strong body toward him.

"My lord," she whispered. "My lord."

"Who—are—you?" spelt the British helio. "Who—are—you?" The right hand of the Englishman on the roof began to jerk rhythmically.

Naida looked at him and she moaned a little. She called again to him in that wonderful voice of hers, softly, softly:

"Jan—my lord, my life, this is death."

The Englishman remained stolid, concentrated, passive. His hand worked in staccato jerks; the beam of light danced and jerked with it.

"Retire—Bhagwana," he flashed. "Retire—Bhagwana."

Naida slid across the cushions to the man's side. She leaned her rich young body against his. She wound her arms about him—her soft, round, pliant arms. The warmth and sex of them struck through his silken garments; the perfume of her body and her vesture was all about him and stealing on his senses.

"Jan," she whispered. "My lord, Jan, my life. Am I not beautiful? Am I not worth all things? Oh! my lord, my lord!"

Her breast was against his breast. Her face was very near his face. He could see the deep and sleepy enchantment of her eyes. Her lips were red and soft, so soft. The backward inclination of her head showed him her throat, curving deliciously to sink alluringly into her breast.

"Jan," she whispered, "Jan, I am beautiful, beautiful. I am yours. I am worth all things."

Her sex and her mystery all but intoxicated him, but he fought it. He wrenched his gaze away. He looked steadily down at the fight in the valley. His hand moved and moved.

"Retire—Bhagwana—village," he flickered. "Enemy—ambushed"——

Naida's left hand pulled his face down to the satin softness of her shoulders, where the warm curve of the throat sinks into it. Her arms tightened.

"Jan, my lord," she whispered. "You are bringing death. Is not my love better than death? Am I not better than death—richer, lovelier?" She clung to him tightly.

The man fought her, fought all that she meant. He pushed her back, his left hand against her breast. With his right the message flickered inexorably. If he stopped that message, hung for the barest moment, Naida and all Naida's loveliness and love would win—the British force would lose. With gritted teeth he fought down the rising tumult of his woman-bewitched senses. His message went on.

"Gorge — by — Deh-i-Mazang—a trap," his ray spelt out. "A trap"——

Naida's arms were tight about him. He could not fend her off. He did not try. He let her cling to him. It did not matter; he could work his right hand. He could look over her shoulder at the valley.

Naida's face came between him and the valley. She strove to interpose the allure that was in her eyes and his fellow-Englishmen. He shut his eyes. His message went on mechanically.

"Gorge — by Deh-i-Mazang — a trap. Afghans"——

"Jan," she whispered. "My lord, Jan, for all my love stop. For me, for all of me, stop, stop."

The Englishman did not open his eyes. The mechanical flickering of the right hand went on: "Afghans—ambushed — in — gorge — Afghans ambushed—in"——

Naida's strong, lithe arms pressed him tighter to her. She strained him against her yielding bosom. She pressed and pressed him in her embrace.

"—the gor"— spelt the message, and then it stopped.

The signal sergeant in the Lancers swore and demanded "Repeat—repeat." Nothing more came from the house on the hill.

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Upon the roof the man stayed for many moments locked in the woman's arms. Presently the woman got to her feet, and the man slid gently to the cushion as though tired out. The woman looked down at him. Her face was bitter and sad. A burst of firing came up from the valley. It seemed to recall the woman to her senses. She passed her hand over her eyes like one dispelling a bad dream. She looked down into the valley. She saw that the fighting in the valley had shifted away to the village of Bhagwana. It meant nothing to her, and she watched it dispiritedly. Presently as she watched a burst of cheering arose from the hills over Kabul. She saw that many of the Goralog soldiers, those who wore petticoats, were bursting into a foam over the hill toward the gorge of the village of Deh-i-Mazan. They were firing as they went.

She looked quickly toward the prone man on the roof.

But the prone man did not lift himself to look. The hard Afghanistan sunlight struck vivid sparkles of light out of the jewelled hilt of a dagger that was buried to the guard in his back. It had entered at the base of the neck—just where Naida's strong right hand had rested when she had embraced him.